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## HOW TO BE HUMAN (AGAIN) | TOGETHER

July 11, 2021

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Today, we conclude our sermon series, which we have entitled *How To Be Human (Again)*. At one level, we've been talking about how we might need to brush up on our social skills as we emerge from life under the pandemic and reenter society, but at a deeper level, we've been exploring the theological concept of sanctification, which is God's way of change. Jesus not only shows us what a truly human life looks like—because of the way in which he himself lived—but the moment you put your faith in Jesus, God begins a process of making you fully human like Jesus himself. Even now, God is on a mission to renew his image in you so that you might become your truest self—the person that God has called and destined you to be.

Today, I'd like to share something unique about sanctification. As modern New Yorkers, many of us are focused on what you could call the project of the self. We're all about self improvement—and that's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with wanting to become a happier, healthier human being—except for one little thing. I want you to notice that fixation on *the self*. It's all about you. It's all about improving the self. Here's where Christianity offers something unique and distinctive. God does care quite a bit about you, as a person. God cares about who you are, how you live, what you become as a unique and special individual, but he doesn't stop there. God doesn't only call you to follow him as an individual, but to form a community of people who follow him together. In the Christian vision, the only way that you were ever going to become genuinely fully human is together with others. That's unique. The process of sanctification is not only making you a person who is devoted and connected to Jesus, but also devoted and connected to other people whose center of gravity likewise is shifting away from the self and focused on Jesus himself.

What I'd like us to do is to consider the priority of Christian community, the practices of Christian community and the power of Christian community by looking at a wider section from Colossians 3. I will read verses nine through 17, but really I have verses one through 17 in mind. Listen as I read this letter from the Apostle Paul,

“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

This is God’s word. It’s trustworthy, and it’s true, and it’s given to us in love.

### **The Priority Of Christian Community**

The first thing that we should notice is that Paul underscores the priority of Christian community. We’ve already seen that Paul has told us that just as some sets of clothing might be appropriate for certain roles and occasions, so we must take off those patterns of thought and behavior that do not fit and put on those qualities and characteristics that make sense in light of the new identity that we have received in Christ. What I want you to notice here—whether you’re talking about sexual misbehavior or malicious speech, as Paul describes in verses one through eight—Paul not only cares about how each individual behaves, but [he cares] especially on the way that our behavior impacts the community as a whole. That’s what’s really in view for Paul, is the ways in which we are united together in community and this has to be a community of love.

Why does that matter so much? Because you’ll never become who you are really supposed to be. You’ll never become genuinely human in isolation. God not only calls you to follow him, as an individual Christian who loves and serves Jesus, but to form a community of people who love and serve him together. God’s goal is not merely to gather together autonomous individuals, but to create a new society of human beings that reflect his wider purposes in the world. We see that in verse 11. He says “here there is not Greek, or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free.” He says, “here there is not,” although perhaps a better way to translate that might be *here there cannot be*. Here there cannot be the divisions that often exist out there in the world. The deep divisions that exist in our society that keep us from one another cannot exist here within the community of the church. He’s not suggesting that Greeks and Jews, barbarians and scythians no longer exist within the community of the church, but rather, he’s saying that they must not divide us. Those differences continue to exist, but those differences must no longer divide us. It’s not as if we suddenly lose all the particulars of our social, cultural, geographical, national, ethnic or racial differences when we’re united in Christ, but rather these differences no longer divide us. We’re called to be one because Jesus is all and in all. In other words, Jesus is all that matters.

There’s been much discussion and debate over this past year, in particular about the topic of race. There’s a lot of people who have said to me at different points in time, *well, I don’t really like what’s being mandated in the workplace, or I don’t like what’s being taught in the schools. I don’t like the ideology behind all this. I don’t like the theory. I don’t like the practice.* That’s fine. You might have good reasons for resisting these things. There might be reasons why you’re critical of critical race theory, but what I’d like to stop and consider is that perhaps, at least part of the reason, why some people are pushing this agenda in the public realm, and perhaps part of the reason why that agenda is gaining so much traction, is at least in part, because we Christians have failed to show in concrete, tangible ways how Jesus breaks down the barriers that divide us as human beings and bring us together. You see, racial reconciliation is our birthright. This is something that is foundational to the Christian

faith. It's right here in the text. It's at the heart of the gospel. We don't have to make this up. We don't have to go looking for it. It's right here from the very beginning of the founding of the church. The problem is that we as Christians, we haven't owned this. We haven't sought to put it in concrete tangible ways to the extent that perhaps we should have. We need to embrace the vision for racial reconciliation that is offered to us in the New Testament. Look, the Apostle Paul is not being glib. He understands the almost unbridgeable gulfs that exist between people in the world today, but he also trusts in the power of Jesus to bring us together. When Jesus brings us together, he doesn't allow us to remain as we are, but rather, he so transforms our hearts, that a true meeting of the minds becomes possible. That's what we have to embrace: Christ is all and in all, and if we have Christ, then we have everything that we need. If we have Christ together, then we can't let anything come between us.

Still, some people might say, *but is it really necessary? Is Christian community really necessary? I mean, isn't it possible for us to simply believe in God on our own? Can't we just read the Bible and pray on our own.* Let me give you one more thing to think about. This past week, I was reading an article in the paper about some of the people who were involved in the attack on the Capitol building on January 6. The paper provided a profile of a number of the leaders involved in the attack, and what was interesting about it is that many of these leaders identified themselves as Christians. They say that they're Christians, they're followers of Jesus, and that is why they got involved. The curious thing is that when you dig a little deeper and ask them about their beliefs and practices, they actually know very, very little about historic Christian beliefs and practices. Many of them consider themselves to be self proclaimed prophets who are engaged in some kind of spiritual battle. One person referred to himself as a multidimensional being. Another woman called herself a free living soul, who is not answerable to anyone except for God alone. So here you have many people who are identifying themselves as Christians, but there's very little Christian about their beliefs or their practices. Whatever their religious convictions might be, it is clear that they are highly, highly individualistic. Many of these people were not part of any church, not part of any denomination, not even part of some broader theological school of thought. Whatever their religious convictions might be, they are based on their own individual experience. That's exactly the problem. They're not part of any larger institution that could provide a check, or provide some kind of accountability. Nothing that could curb some of the excesses of their thought or behavior. This got me thinking—it's become fashionable and even cliché for people to say, *well, I'm spiritual, but not religious. I believe in God, but I'm not really into organized religion.* You know what, I want more people who are spiritual and religious. I think we need more organized religion. Institutions have their problems, but I'm a fan of healthy institutions because we're not supposed to follow Jesus all on our own. We need to be part of a church. We need to be part of a structure. We need to be part of a larger community, so that our excesses can't be allowed to run wild. There is a curb on our own thinking and behavior. There is some kind of accountability. The fact is that you really are the company you keep. It's the people you hang out with, the people you spend time with, the people you live with and learn from who mold you, form you, shape you into the person that you are becoming. You will never become the person that God has called you to be in isolation. You've got to be part of a community, which is one very strong reason why in addition to participating in Sunday worship, I

would encourage everyone to get involved in a community group when we relaunch them this fall. I've even thought that perhaps one of our slogans should be if you don't want to end up like one of those self-professed prophets, get involved in the community group. Those are your two options.

### **The Practices Of Christian Community**

Paul not only emphasizes the priority of Christian community, but he also lays out for us the practices of Christian community. Paul tells us that we have to take off and we have to put on those qualities and characteristics that make sense in light of the new identity that we have received in Christ when we put our faith and trust in him. I want you to notice a few things: All the terms that Paul uses to describe a person who is being renewed in the image of God are used elsewhere to describe God or Jesus in particular. That should make sense. If God by his grace has gone to great lengths in order to adopt you into his family and make you his child, well then we're called to reflect the family likeness. There's the expression like father like son, and that's true. Like God, like child. That's how we're supposed to be. We're supposed to become more and more like our Heavenly Father, and so in verse 12, Paul tells us to put on "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." These are the very characteristics of Jesus, but more than that, the kinds of things that Paul prescribes here are precisely the types of things that are going to lead us further down the path of true humanness. There's a lot of people who object to Christianity. They say *it's too stifling. It's too repressive. In order to be a Christian, you have to deny the self. It sounds like that means that you have to reject your humanity. You have to reject what's human about you*, but nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing inhuman about genuine Christian spirituality. There's nothing inhuman about genuine Christian spirituality, but rather, Christian spirituality helps you become genuinely human. It helps you become your truest self. That's what we need. The call to put on the qualities and characteristics of Jesus does not lead us to obliterate our personality, but rather, that is the key that unlocks our true personality. N.T. Wright has given us an interesting thought experiment. He says that Paul lays out for us in this passage, two representative lists of vices on the one hand (in verses five through nine) and virtues on the other (in verses 12 through 17). He asks us to imagine two different towns. In one town, everybody lives out those vices, and in the other town, everybody lives out those virtues. Then he asked the question, which town would you rather live in? I don't think the answer should be too hard for us to find. The question is, how do we become a church like that? A church that rejects those vices and embraces those virtues? If you drill down on this passage, and you consider carefully the practices to which Paul calls us, you could sum it up like this: He's inviting us to participate in a ministry of the word, a ministry of praise and a ministry of reconciliation.

### **Ministry Of Word**

First of all, he calls us to uphold a ministry of the word. He says, beginning in verse 16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom." So he places the word of Christ at the very center of the community, and that makes sense. People talk about the importance of having unity. Unity within the church, unity within Christian circles, but there cannot be any unity apart from the unity of the word of Christ. It's the unity in the gospel—the gospel of Jesus—that brings us together. Over the last couple of weeks, I've repeatedly said that God's way

of change is neither self-reliant activity, nor God-reliant passivity, but God-dependent effort. In other words, you're not going to change by just sitting there. There's something that you're supposed to do, but the effort that you put forth is learning to rely on Jesus more. We see that right here. You have to exert yourself, but the effort that you put forth is to *let*—you hear that word—let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Let it dwell in you abundantly. Of course, that is something that you can and should do on your own, but remember, Paul is writing to a community of people. He's not writing an individual letter to one specific person. This is something that we're called to do together, and part of the reason why is for the reasons that I stated earlier. It's very possible for you to read the Bible in isolation, all on your own, by yourself, and read it incorrectly. You can read the Bible on your own and come to the conclusion that you were a free living soul, unaccountable to no one, except yourself. Given our natural proclivities, it's important for us to read the scriptures not only on our own, in our individual personal Bible study, but also together with others—it's another reason to be part of a community group. Pastor and Theologian Sinclair Ferguson pushes this point even further, and emphasizes the value of what people used to call sitting under someone else's preaching. Have you ever heard that expression before, sitting under someone's preaching? Now, it's a little awkward for me to make this point as a preacher, but you should know that I too sit under the preaching of others. It's one of the values of being able to listen to the sermons of other pastors and preachers from different times and places through the internet. This is how Ferguson puts it. He says,

“Although set at a discount today by comparison with participation in either person Bible study or more particularly group Bible study, neither of these, valuable as they may be, can substitute for the transforming power of the preached word. While today this is a controverted, even controversial view, in the present writer's experience it is controverted only by those who have little or no experience of it (or, sadly, have declined to participate in it and receive it) ... In our [Christian] sub-culture there is a heavy emphasis on what we must do—including what we must do with our Bibles. But there is almost no emphasis that accords with the stress in the New Testament on what our Bibles will do to us! ... This, incidentally, is why it is so important for Christians to place their lives under the preaching of God's word. For in receiving it we are actively passive.”

Did you catch that phrase? Actively passive, for in receiving the preached word we are actively passive.

“It is expounded to us, not by us; and yet it appeals to our minds, reshapes our thinking, penetrates our consciences, and at this level engages us in intense activity.”

### **Ministry Of Praise**

A primary practice of Christian community is the ministry of the word, and the ministry of the word leads to a ministry of praise. Paul goes on to say in verse 16, not only, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” But then he goes on to say, “Singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” This is essential. Worship is essential to Christian community. There is often a lot of debate when it comes

to worship music, but most of those debates centered around form or style. You'll notice that Paul's not really interested in that. You can sing all kinds of things—psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. It doesn't matter. He doesn't care about the form or the style. He cares about the content. What is the content? The content of the songs we sing is not meant to express whatever our subjective feelings or experiences of God might be, but rather, the focus of our songs should be gratitude. Gratitude for what God has already done for us by his grace, in and through Jesus Christ. We're called to sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God.

This extends to all of life because thankfulness, gratitude, that is the key distinguishing mark of the Christian. That's what should define you. When people think of you the first thing that they should think of is thankfulness and gratitude because of all that God has already done for you by his grace in and through Christ. That's why Paul concludes this section by saying, whenever you do, whatever you do, doesn't matter, "Whatever you do in word or deed in thought, or action, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." The only way we're going to become the people that God has destined us to be as individuals and as a church is if we are centered on Jesus. You see the centrality of Jesus in this passage. It's not just the word of Christ that must dwell in us richly. It's also the peace of Christ, which must rule in our hearts. There's no unity apart from the unity of the gospel. There's no unity within the church apart from unity around Jesus.

### **Ministry Of Reconciliation**

Finally, this ministry of the word, and this ministry of praise leads to a ministry of reconciliation. There's a great place toward the beginning of [Fyodor] Dostoevsky's novel, Brothers Karamazov, where Dostoevsky describes a person who aspires to be someone who loves people. He wants to be someone who loves humanity, but then he discovers something strange and curious within himself, which is that the more he longs to love human beings in general, the more he hates human beings in particular. So this is how he puts it. He says,

"I love humanity," he said, "but I wonder at myself. The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. In my dreams," he said, "I often come to making enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually have faced crucifixion if it had been suddenly necessary; and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with any one for two days together, as I know by experience. As soon as any one is near me, his personality disturbs my self-complacency and restricts my freedom. In 24 hours I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner; another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually the more ardent becomes my love for humanity."

At a later point in the novel, Dostoevsky says that, "One can love one's neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it's almost impossible." Many of us might find that to be the case. We longed to be embedded in a community. What we most want as human beings is to be known for who we really are, and yet

loved at the same time. Some people know us. They know us all too well, and that's perhaps why they don't love us. Other people love us, but we fear they don't really know us, and if they did, then perhaps they might stop loving us. What we most want is to be known and loved—warts and all—for who we really are. Oftentimes, it seems like that kind of relationship, that kind of community, is nothing but a beautiful dream. It's possible, perhaps, to love one another in the abstract or at a distance, but in close quarters, it often seems nearly impossible. That's why we need the Apostle Paul, because he's not naive about these things. No, he's a realist. He knows that if you're going to live out your unity in Christ, it is going to require a ministry of reconciliation. So he not only tells us to put on, for example, "Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience," but he goes on to say in verse 11, that we have to bear with one another. "If one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive and above all put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful."

You're never going to become fully human. You're never going to become your truest self in isolation. The only way you're ever going to become a genuine human being is through community with other people, with other people who share a common commitment to Jesus. Let me be quite clear, there is no perfect church. There's no perfect community group because every church, every community group is filled with humans. Every church is filled with people who are messed up and dysfunctional, including the pastor. So if by some miracle, you were to discover the perfect church, you do realize, don't you, that at the very moment that you join, at the very moment that you become a part of that community, it would no longer be perfect. So there is no perfect church because every church is a collection of messed up dysfunctional people. Therefore, we should expect there to be problems. With any church, there's going to be problems. There's going to be mistakes and misunderstandings. There's going to be confusion and hurt and pain. There's also going to be healing and reconciliation and love. You see, it's inconceivable that those who have benefited from the peacemaking work of the cross, should hold on to feelings of bitterness, hatred, contempt, or animosity towards one another. No, if Jesus rules in your heart, then the peace of Jesus has to rule over our community.

But how do we do that? How do we learn to become a community like that? How do we learn to live out this ministry of love and reconciliation? I think Paul provides us with a clue. The only way to love is to be loved. The only way to learn how to bear with other people is to be born with. The only way to forgive is to be forgiven. The place where God has supremely revealed his love, his forbearance, his forgiveness is the cross. Think about what the cross tells you about yourself and Jesus, the fact that Jesus goes to the cross means that Jesus knows you. He knows you to the core of your being. He knows you with all your sin, and that is precisely why he goes to the cross. So he knows you for who you really are, and yet he loves you. He doesn't reject you. He goes to the cross and he stays—he stays on the cross—not because it felt good, and not because you were so easy to love, but rather because he made a promise. He made a promise that he would never leave or forsake you. He made a promise that he would renew you in God's image. When you see how Jesus loves you, even though he knows you, and you see the extent to which he is willing to care for you, be

patient with you and forgive you, that's what gives you the power. That's what gives you the power to live differently. You don't have to hold on to grudges and grievances. You don't have to lie or manipulate. You don't have to hold on to bitterness or animosity. You can let these things go. You can speak the truth. You can be kind. You can be compassionate. You can be patient. You can love. You can forgive because this is what God in Christ has done for you. The only way to love is to be loved. The only way to bear with others is to be born with. The only way to forgive is to be forgiven. You are never going to become a fully genuine human being in isolation. The only way you will become the person that God has destined you to be is together with others, but if we're going to live together in community, well then, it will require a supernatural resource that only Jesus can provide, which is divine love. So let's do it together.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father God, we acknowledge that our need is great. We're not the people that you've called us to be, and we know that we can't do it on our own. We pray that you would help us to prioritize community in our own lives. Don't allow us to go out on our own. Embed us in relationships with one another, so that we might discover our true selves, in community with those who are also devoted and connected to you. Show us how to live out this ministry of the word, this ministry of praise, this ministry of reconciliation, not by relying on ourselves and our own efforts but by learning how to depend on Jesus more and more. Help us to look to you by face so that we might receive the power to live differently. We ask in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.*